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SUMMARY

On the assumption that a woman's physical and mental condition at childbirth is a product of her life-long daily habits and ideas as well as any particular injunctions set up to insure well-being in pregnancy and parturition, the cultural scene was searched to ascertain all possible relevancies.

The farmers of Bang Chan lived in a tropical, rice-growing terrain, annually flooded by the monsoon run-off. Food was plentiful even if cash was not. Except for better housing and equipment, and a greater enjoyment of market novelties, the rich lived much like the poor. The work in the fields by women paralleled that by men. Sharp physical demands, especially at planting and harvest, made them muscular.

At marriage the partners were fully mature and no woman was married against her wishes. The birth of a child was welcomed as leading to higher personal, social, and economic status.

The underlying concepts which explain why the food and other injunctions, both pre-natal and post-partum, and the ritual behavior took their particular forms, are explained.

The human body, harboring multiple immaterial souls, was seen as composed of earth, fire, water, and wind. Illness was caused by intrusive disruption of these four elements, or by soul loss. Food and medicines had properties which could be used to restore balance in the elements. The traditional curers or exorcisers had magical and herbal remedies obtained ritually from a teacher. Since Buddhist phrasings, often read from old texts in weekly sermons, molded Bang Chan's conception of life, the ultimate cause of health or illness was the presence or absence of merit. This determined one's kam (karma), the balance sheet of virtuous actions which one added to, or reduced by sinning throughout successive existences over eons of time.

The Buddhist cosmic view of individuals as separate autonomous beings brought it about that help was the only dynamic relationship possible between people. The bonds established by helping people, on this earth, especially in the tasks of feeding priests, lasted on into successive incarnations. Thus, meritorious people met again and might marry again. Families had continuity over time, and babies were born into the "right"

This economic picture indicates that from early childhood, women had engaged in such physical labor that by 18 years of age they had strong muscles and backs through lifting, stooping, and squatting. Since to stop work during pregnancy was construed as laziness, women worked vigorously up to the day of delivery. If a woman were delivered during one of the hectic seasons, she might shorten her post-natal rest to whatever she thought was a safe minimum.

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Marriage

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As people of the community often met at the temple, at ceremonies, and at work parties, there too young people met. Unmarried girls went freely and often alone on duties about the community, and also to Mīnburī to sell vegetables or take a load of paddy to the mill. To temple fairs and such they went in groups. Though parents hoped their children would marry within the community, a few young people "married out."

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Girls were married between 17 and 27 or so, most frequently around 21 to 23. Since boys at 21 might have to serve 2 years in the army, and were urged to spend as well at least a few months in the priesthood, their marriages took place between 22 and 30, most often around 24 or so. Parents were in no hurry to marry off their grown children at the very age when their productivity was funneling wealth back into the family. However, if male help in the family were short, parents were more receptive to suitors. No girl was married against her wishes nor to a stranger.[4] Marriages might be arranged through formal conversations opened by the man's family and carried on through a go-between, but the girl had the final say. A secret agreement between the partners might even precede negotiations. About half of the marriages were elopements, sometimes arranged because negotiations were dragging, sometimes to avoid the higher costs of more formal arrangements. Marriage, though largely based on socio-economic factors (Phillips:62) was not devoid of personal esteem. Sharp (Bang Chan data at Cornell) has a note on the desirable qualities in a husband as viewed by women. "Sexual virility," last on the list, was minimized in relation to such qualities as "religiousness," "wealth," "industriousness," which headed the list.

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4. A person who uses magical means to force an unwilling woman's love "will be born 500 times as a mad dog."

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